



Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia (Inc)

**FEDERAL COUNCIL
"Access to Education"**

SUBMISSION

to the

**Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations
on the**

Discussion Paper

Review of Australian Higher Education

from

**Federal Council
of the
Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia Inc
ICPA (Aust)**

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**Compiled by
Mr Mick Cullenward
Federal Tertiary Portfolio Leader, ICPA (Aust)**

Contact:

**(Mrs) Glennis Crawford
Federal Secretary
ICPA (Aust)
PO Box 540
WAIKERIE SA 5330
FedSecretary@icpa.com.au**

**www.icpa.com.au
Review of Australian Higher Education**

The Federal Council of the Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia, ICPA (Aust), welcomes the opportunity to have input into the discussion paper on the review of Australian Higher Education, chaired by Emeritus Professor Denise Bradley, AO.

ICPA (Aust) is a voluntary parent body dedicated to ensuring all geographically isolated students have equity of access to a continuing and appropriate education. It encompasses the education of children from early childhood through to tertiary. Member families of the Association reside in rural and remote Australia and all share a common goal of access to education for their children and the provision of services required to achieve this. Our children are educated in small rural schools, at boarding schools and school term hostels and by distance education and they may have access to early childhood services. Students wishing to study at a tertiary level almost always need live away from home to do so.

Access and affordability of tertiary education are the most pressing issues for our members. There are approximately 3,500 ICPA members who reside in rural and remote Australia. These members are reporting, with increasing desperation, the difficulty their children are having accessing and affording tertiary studies. At the upcoming ICPA Annual Federal Conference, a large number of motions relate to the difficulty accessing tertiary education, highlighting the financial and emotional struggle involved in getting to the front gate of the institution, difficulty gaining income support and the inadequacy of income support whilst studying and living away from home. Students wishing to access tertiary education must relocate from their homes and families in order to access most tertiary institutions. This involves substantial upfront costs which are often out of the reach of these students. These students therefore choose not to participate and hence do not reach their full educational potential.

ICPA (Aust) currently has a proposal that, as a matter of national urgency, the Federal government of Australia introduce a tertiary access allowance as financial assistance for those rural and remote students who must relocate and live away from home to access tertiary education. The tertiary access allowance advocated by ICPA (Aust) is to enable students to initially access their place of study which includes for these students, funding the high upfront costs of securing accommodation, relocation expenses including travel and other costs associated with leaving home to study. Narrowing support mechanisms and ever increasing costs (rents, college fees, travel, living expenses, fuel etc) are rapidly multiplying the difficulties involved in accessing studies so far away from home, often over a thousand kilometres away.

It is with these issues as a background that ICPA (Aust) has chosen three subsections to address within section 3.2 of the discussion paper section entitled 'Opportunities to Participate in Higher Education'.

Higher Education Participation and Attainment for Disadvantaged Groups

It is noted that when discussing the participation and attainment of disadvantaged groups, the *Review of Australian Higher Education Discussion Paper* has referred to the 1990 discussion paper, *A Fair Chance for All* (DEET 1990) for a definition for equity. *A Fair Chance For All* identified 6 equity groups:

- People from lower socio-economic backgrounds
- People from rural and isolated areas
- People with a disability
- People from a non-English speaking background
- Women in non-traditional areas of study and higher degrees
- Indigenous students

The Australian Higher Education review discussion paper notes the progress made in improving the participation of people with disabilities, of people from non-English speaking backgrounds and of women. It states that the success in these areas has not been matched by attainment of university-level qualifications in two groups, those being Indigenous people and people from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds.

We are concerned that the group, 'People from rural and isolated areas' (or 'rural and remote areas' as is now the more common reference), has not been acknowledged as a separate equity group within the terms of this current discussion paper. This group has only been referred to in terms of being aligned with low SES groups, when highlighting that low SES rural people are more under represented than low SES urban dwellers.

It is the case that between 1991 and 2005, the proportion of regional (encompassing rural and remote) university students, *decreased* from 20% to 17.7%. People from rural and remote areas should therefore also be considered as a disadvantaged group in regard to participation and attainment in higher education and this should be included as a key issue for consideration.

The issues people from rural and remote areas face are not just economic in terms of a low income base. Hand in hand are the high access costs to tertiary education, including relocation costs, upfront costs to secure accommodation, travel etc. Combined with the higher costs people residing in these areas must pay, is the fact that as they are forced through circumstances to move away from home to study, (i.e. lack of access to local tertiary institutions), they of necessity are also removed from their families and hence experience the loss of emotional and financial support provided by their families. The impact of the removal from this support should not be underestimated.

Minister for Education, Julia Gillard, in her speech from *The Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS) Social Inclusion Conference – Discussion paper* (April 2008), referred to equity as being the 'weakest point' in Australia's education system. The Minister noted that, given the importance of higher education to Australia's future, it was hard to believe that the participation rate of lower socio-economic background students in higher education actually

fell from 15.1 percent to 14.6 percent between 2001 and 2006. It is obvious to ICPA (Aust) that, for rural and remote students, it is *access* that is the critical factor causing this fall in participation rates.

The Minister, in this same speech, referred to the work of Richard Teese, who described how few teenagers from regional and remote Australia scored highly enough at Year 12 to enter our leading universities. The reasons for this outcome are varied. We believe, however, that this is an equity issue. Where a student on reaching secondary school has no choice of access to an appropriate school in order to enable the child to develop to their full educational potential, and where there is no financial assistance to access their school of choice, the result is that desired education outcomes are often more difficult to achieve.

It is obvious that lack of equity for rural and remote students commences long before tertiary education. What our organisation knows is that it is the lack of recognition and action on this equity issue which is hindering our rural and remote students in accessing an appropriate education, through their secondary school years and continuing on through to their tertiary education years.

Rural and remote students should be recognised as an equity group in their own right and it is imperative that the disadvantage they face when trying to access and participate in tertiary education is addressed as a result of this review.

There are specific factors which greatly impact on students from rural and remote areas and these relate to the issues of geographic location and income support.

Geographic Location

The discussion paper recognises that rural people classified as of low socio-economic status participate at much lower rates in tertiary education than low socio-economic status urban students.

Geographic location is a major barrier to almost *all* rural and remote students wishing to access tertiary study. These students have no option but to relocate, away from their home and family support, in order to access any tertiary institution to pursue their course of study. The costs associated with relocating from home, often hundreds of kilometres away, are enormous and ever increasing.

The Australian Government has recognised geographical disadvantage for rural and remote secondary students through provision of the Assistance for Isolated Students scheme (AIC). Once a student progresses onto tertiary education, access allowances cease to exist and some of these same students who were eligible for the AIC must rely on qualifying for welfare payments to enable them to undertake tertiary education. In Australia in 2008, students who live in rural and remote areas are being denied the right of access to a tertiary education.

ICPA (Aust) has made representation to the Federal Government of Australia to introduce a tertiary access allowance as provision of financial assistance to rural and remote students who must live away from home to access tertiary education.

The extension of the Commonwealth Scholarship Program to include National Accommodation Scholarships for students relocating interstate to study specialist courses not available near their home, demonstrates that the government is aware of access and associated relocation costs. The government has suggested that assistance is needed for students who have to move interstate (e.g. from Alice Springs to Adelaide) but not acknowledged the costs if they need to move vast distances intrastate (e.g. from Mount Isa to Brisbane). It is often less costly and a more appropriate option to move interstate than within one's own state and this inequity must be addressed.

The establishment of the Indigenous Access Scholarship (IAS), for Indigenous students which aims to improve higher education access for Indigenous people particularly those who need to relocate from rural and remote areas, demonstrates that the government is aware that there are additional costs attached for students who must move away from home in order to study at the tertiary level. It is clear that indigenous students are not the only residents of rural and remote Australia who must relocate in order to access a suitable tertiary institution and that support mechanisms must be put in place for all students.

The existing Commonwealth Accommodation Scholarships (CAS) were set up to create equity for students from low socio-economic backgrounds who live in rural and remote areas. Provision has not met demand and whilst ICPA (Aust) welcomes the proposed doubling of these by 2012 there is concern for the many rural and remote students who do not receive a scholarship but still require financial assistance.

Income Support

The discussion paper states that the number of students on income support has declined in recent years from 41% to 33% and suggests that this is because of growth in employment and the tight eligibility requirements meaning that many students just do not qualify for income support.

ICPA (Aust) provides the following information as to why rural and remote students are less likely to successfully apply for income support:

1) Accessing the tertiary institution ('getting to the front gate').

Rural and remote students cannot afford to access the tertiary institution in the first place as there is no assistance for the high upfront access costs, discussed earlier in this submission which include relocation, accommodation (including large upfront bond and rent costs) and the increasing cost of daily living, such as food and fuel. These costs are so great that it becomes too daunting and hard for many to attempt to meet these costs and they therefore do not even get to the stage of applying for income support assistance.

2) Stringent eligibility criteria (qualifying for Youth Allowance).

The report on 'Regional Young People and Youth Allowance: Access to Education' (Godden 2007), found that the strict eligibility criteria for Youth Allowance is the key barrier to accessing a tertiary education for rural young people. This report lists many examples of the difficulties rural students face. The Australian Higher Education Review discussion paper

makes reference to the Universities Australia findings that the main reason for Youth Allowance rejection was the level of parent's income and assets (page 32). We would concur with this point.

The assets test in particular can cause serious assessment problems for those residing in rural Australia. Many families have expensive machinery assets tied up in their primary production business and have seen large increases in land values in some areas which has increased asset values. Families need this land and machinery to operate their businesses and cannot easily liquidate them to provide assistance for their children. This creates the problem of being asset rich but cash poor.

In addition, the criteria requiring a minimum amount to be earned to qualify for independent Youth Allowance makes it very difficult for students from rural and remote Australia. Examples abound of students having to leave home in order to find employment to earn the qualifying amount to be classed as independent for Youth Allowance. If the students do take a year off after leaving school in order to qualify for independent Youth Allowance, they then struggle financially to survive for the first three months of university whilst waiting for the set time criteria, of 18 months from leaving school, to elapse before the first payments for independent Youth Allowance can be made.

3) Financially managing whilst receiving Youth Allowance.

If the students are able to make it past the first two barriers highlighted above, they then have grave difficulties financially managing on Youth Allowance, which is set at little more than subsistence level. The discussion paper again refers to Universities Australia's 2006 findings that many 'Australian University students were in stressful financial situations'. In fact, if a student receives Youth Allowance, the maximum student payment plus rent assistance is about 40% below the Henderson Poverty Line (which was defined in the 1973 Commonwealth Commission of Inquiry into Poverty). This is without accounting for the recent vast increases in basic foodstuffs, fuel and capital city rents.

4) Working whilst receiving Youth Allowance.

Students who live away from home cannot manage on Youth Allowance alone, as referred to above. Students are reporting that the allowable income bank for Youth Allowance is too low and additionally, the amount they are able to earn before reductions to Youth Allowance take place is also too low to enable them to reasonably live. The Universities Australia study also found that students in 2006 were, on average, worse off in financial terms than they were in 2000, particularly those who were engaged in extensive paid work at the same time as attending university.

Many rural and remote students are unable to take time off from their jobs during breaks from university, for fear of losing their job, meaning they are unable to visit home due to the travel time and costs associated with the long distances involved. They therefore do not have access to the emotional or financial support which urban students living at home can readily access and this can have serious implications for the emotional and psychological well being of rural and remote students. Many of these students withdraw from tertiary studies at this point, if they have not already done so.

The information presented in this submission can be used as evidence to assist in answering Question 11 in this discussion paper: *What evidence is available from institutions about the impact on individuals or groups of either failure to gain income support or the inadequacy of income support?*

There is an increasing amount of evidence from studies, including those cited above and the many examples presented to ICPA (Aust) from our members, of the overwhelmingly detrimental impact that the failure to gain income support and the inadequacy of this income support has on tertiary students from rural and remote Australia, both in regard to their studies and their attempts to access a tertiary institution to commence study. ICPA (Aust), due to awareness of the negative impact these factors have on access to tertiary education for rural and remote students, has been recommending, as a matter of urgency, the establishment of a tertiary access allowance.

This new tertiary access allowance we are proposing to Government would operate independently of welfare payments such as Youth Allowance. Youth allowance is a support payment and only comes into effect once a student has got to the door of the tertiary institution. It serves to assist with daily living costs and does not assist students to get to their place of study. Lack of assistance to enable access to relocate and arrive at the 'front gate' of higher education facilities must be recognised as the greatest barrier to rural and remote students taking up tertiary studies.

ICPA (Aust) would welcome further interaction with the Australian Higher Education Review Panel on this vital issue of improving the low participation rates of rural and remote Australians, and ensuring that an appropriate tertiary education becomes an attainable goal for our rural and remote youth.